

## QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK ABOUT LEAD POISONING

### BACKGROUND

**Q:** I heard that most children have less lead in their blood now than 20 years ago. If this is so, why is childhood lead poisoning in the news now?

**A:** The average blood-lead level of U.S. children has come down during the last 20 years, largely because of the reduction of lead levels in gasoline and food. But as blood-lead levels have come down, concern about the effects of low lead levels in children has risen.

**Q:** Why has concern risen about low lead levels in children?

**A:** There is new evidence that lead is harmful at blood levels once thought safe. Studies show that groups of children with higher lead levels are likely to have lower IQ scores, slower development, and more attention problems than similar children with lower lead levels. These effects are subtle and have been observed in large groups of children with lead levels at least as low as 10 micrograms per deciliter. (Micrograms per deciliter, written  $\mu\text{g/dL}$ , indicates the amount of lead in a deciliter of blood.)

### HOUSING

**Q:** How do I know if my house is likely to contain lead-based paint? And if it does have lead-based paint, how do I know if it's posing a threat to my children?

**A:** If your house was built before 1960, it may contain lead-based paint, which a qualified housing inspector could identify. Chipping or peeling lead-based paint is particularly dangerous,

because it is easy for the chips or flakes to get into children's mouths, either as large pieces, or as particles in house dust. It is very important not to repair areas with deteriorating paint yourself, unless you have had your home inspected and **know** it contains no lead-based paint. If inspection shows you have lead-based paint, do not renovate or attempt to remove the paint yourself. Work should be done by someone who knows how to protect workers, your family, and the environment. You and your family should not be in the home during renovations or paint removal.

### BLOOD TESTS

**Q:** Should I have my child's blood tested for lead?

**A:** The only way to know for sure if your children have elevated blood-lead levels is to have them tested. The Centers for Disease Control recommends testing every child at 12 months of age, and if resources allow, at 24 months. Screening should start at 6 months if the child is at risk of lead exposure. (For example, if the child lives in an older home built before 1960 which has peeling or chipping paint.) Decisions about further testing should be based on previous blood-lead test results, and the child's risk of lead exposure. In some states, more frequent lead screening is required by law.

**Q:** Why should I have my child screened for lead?

**A:** Virtually all children in the U.S. are at risk for lead poisoning. As a result of industrialization, lead is widespread in the environment. Lead is harmful to the developing brain and nervous system of fetuses and young children.

Children are more likely than adults to be exposed to lead because they have more hand-to-mouth activity than adults and because they absorb more lead than adults. Large numbers of U.S. children continue to have blood-lead levels in the toxic range. It is important for you to know if your child is one of them.

**Q:** My child's blood-lead level is between 15 and 19  $\mu\text{g/dL}$ . The doctor tells me to bring her back in a few months for another test. Isn't there anything else I could be doing?

**A:** Your child's test showed that she had more lead in her blood than the average child in the U.S. If your child's level stays in this range for several months or goes up, you should have your home inspected in order to find any sources of lead. On the next page, you can learn about sources and pathways of lead exposure for children and how to prevent this exposure.

**Q:** The doctor says my child's lead level is between 10 and 14  $\mu\text{g/dL}$ . What does this mean? Has my child been damaged?

**A:** Studies of the effects of lead on large groups of young children show that lead can be harmful at these blood levels. It is important to remember, however, that these effects are seen in studies of large groups of children, and do not mean that every child will have the same problems. To help your child grow up healthy and smart, make sure she or he receives the proper foods, adequate shelter, and plenty of love.

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## **MAIN SOURCES AND PATHWAYS OF LEAD EXPOSURE IN CHILDREN:**

- Lead-based paint
- Dust and soil
- Drinking water
- Parental occupations and hobbies
- Air
- Food
- Others, such as traditional folk medicines

## **WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO REDUCE BLOOD-LEAD LEVELS**

### **HOUSEKEEPING**

- Keep children away from peeling or chipping paint and accessible or chewable surfaces painted with lead-based paint, especially windows, window sills, and window wells.
- Wet mop and wet wipe hard surfaces, using trisodium phosphate detergent (found at hardware stores) or automatic dishwasher soap and water.
- Do not vacuum hard surfaces because this activity is believed to scatter dust.
- Wash children's hands and faces before they eat.
- Wash toys and pacifiers frequently.

### **NUTRITION**

- Make sure your child eats regular nutritious meals, since more lead is absorbed on an empty stomach.
- Make sure your child's diet contains plenty of iron and calcium:

Examples of foods high in iron are liver, fortified cereal, cooked beans, spinach, and raisins.

Examples of foods high in calcium are milk, yogurt, cheese, and cooked greens.

## **OTHER INTERVENTIONS**

### **• SOIL:**

If soil around your home is likely to be lead-contaminated (such as around a home built before 1960 or near a major highway), plant grass or other ground cover. If lead-based paint is the source of soil contamination, most lead will be near painted surfaces such as exterior walls. In such cases, plant bushes next to the house to keep children away. If your soil is contaminated with lead, provide a sandbox with a solid bottom and top cover, and clean sand for children to play and dig in.

### **• WATER:**

If the lead content of tap water is higher than the drinking water standard, let the water run for several minutes before using it. Use only fully-flushed water from the cold-water tap for drinking and cooking. To conserve water, collect drinking water in bottles at night after you've fully flushed the water from the tap.

### **• FOOD:**

Do not store food in open cans, especially imported cans. Do not store or serve food in pottery that is meant for decorative use.

### **• PARENTS' WORK OR HOBBIES:**

If you or others in your family work with lead, make sure not to expose your children through any lead-contaminated clothing or scrap material you may bring home.

## **IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING PREVENTION**

### **THE 1991 CDC STATEMENT PREVENTING LEAD POISONING IN YOUNG CHILDREN**

The 1991 statement on childhood lead poisoning prevention from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) contains:

- Background information on childhood lead poisoning and how to prevent it
- Information for health-care providers and public agencies about managing and preventing childhood lead poisoning

The 1991 statement is based on scientific information gathered during the 1980s. In the new statement, CDC:

- Lowers the blood-lead level of concern and calls for a multitier approach to follow-up of children with elevated blood-lead tests, with more intensive medical and environmental interventions at higher blood-lead levels.
- Proposes a phase-in of virtually universal screening for children, using blood-lead measurement.
- Calls for efforts to prevent lead poisoning before it occurs.

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